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**Socio-pragmatic Study of Idioms and
Proverbs**

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Abstract

Cognitive Pragmatics is part of cognitive linguistics. It is an approach to linguistic meaning which appeared as a result of dissatisfaction with formal pragmatics because it cannot describe the cognitive process of understanding some expressions such as idioms and proverbs adequately. The most two striking claims made by cognitive pragmatics is that, firstly, there is an intentional nature of human communication: specifically, the idea that the use of language on the part of the speaker is instrumental to conveying their communicative intention (i.e., his intention to communicate something specific to the situation) and, reciprocally, what the addressee aims to is the recognition of such an intention. Secondly is the inferential (and in a sense, rational) nature of human communication, that is, the idea that both the speaker and the addressee are involved in a form of practical reasoning: the speaker has to find out which utterance is a suitable means for the addressee to recover his communicative intention (in context), while the addressee has to travel the same path in the opposite direction— from the means (i.e., the utterance) to the communicative goal of the speaker. As a matter of fact, however, scholars in cognitive pragmatics have spent their efforts almost exclusively in the analysis of the latter process of understanding: how the addressee comes to identify the communicative intention of the speaker, as well as, the factors that participate in constructing meaning of such implicatures. In additions, they investigated how far these factors are interconnected.

Key words: Cognitive Pragmatics, Mental Space Theory, Blending/Conceptual Integration Theory, Proverbs, Idioms

Introduction

The Mental Space Theory (Fauconnier 1994) emerged as a development of the publication of *Metaphors We Live By* by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in 1980 which has received a lot of attention and helped complementary theories for meaning construction to emerge. Fauconnier's theory was developed later forming Conceptual Integration Theory/Blending Theory (Fauconnier and Turner 2002).

In their influential research on cognitive understanding process, Fauconnier and Turner have offered both predictions and explanations about the nature of this integration by presuming that a mental model consists of a collection of mental spaces that are connected to one another through processes of embedding and blending. These processes are not restricted to the understanding of figurative phrases but, are general and pervasive processes involved in language and cognition (Fauconnier 1985; Fauconnier and Turner 2002) For example, linguistic phenomena such as metaphors, analogies and frames are often explained as blends between two or more mental spaces; the conceptual integration of spaces is the cognitive process through which these phenomena acquire meaning in a particular context (Coulson and Van Petten 2002; Coulson and Oakley 2005; Fauconnier and Turner 2002). In other word, Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) cognitive theory places the human cognition at the centre of linguistic description and it considers linguistic meaning as a manifestation of cognitive conceptual structure.

Furthermore, the present study is a cognitive- pragmatic analysis of the impact of personal socio-cultural factors on meaning construction in selected English and Arabic proverbs from two entirely different cultures. Proverbs, literal and metaphorical, reflect the culture of societies. They have a great potentiality to mirror the different cultures in the world. Culture can be best presented and communicated through proverbs.

1.1 Aims of the Research

The objective of the study is conducting a cognitive pragmatic analysis of some selected English and Arabic proverbs in terms of Mental Space Theory and Conceptual Blending Theory. Also, it explores the shared and culture-specific figurative phrases in English and Arabic. In addition, it investigates how Conceptual Integration networks and Mental Spaces are powerful tools for investigating the impact of socio- cultural factors on meaning construction in the selected English and Arabic proverbs.

1.2 Research Questions

This study tries to answer the following questions:

- 1- To what extent is cogni- pragmatics relevant to understanding idioms and proverbs?
- 2- how is Fauconnier and Turner in the theory of Conceptual Integration (2002) applicable to analysing idioms and proverbs?
- 3- . which factors (eg. social, cultural, etc.) are integrated in comprehending those figurative phrases? And are they of equal significance?

1.3 Literature Review

Given that language is used to construct our social lives and using this understanding to improve our world, language and culture are inextricably intermingled. This togetherness has been widely highlighted in several linguistic, social and cultural studies (e.g.

Alptekin, 2002; Brown, 1994; Bygate, 2005; Jiang, 2000; MacKenzie, 2012; Risager, 2007;). Peterson and Coltrane (2003) emphasize that to achieve desired communication, culturally appropriate language use appear to be a must. In other words, knowledge of linguistic features is not adequate for successful intercultural communication (Scarino, 2010).

Cognitive and corpus linguistics have provided pedagogically sound approaches.

Further, students have been found to recall idioms when they are connected with their literal meaning (Boers, 2000). Since the 1970s idioms have received significant attention and though in literature there have existed diverse idiom theories about idiomatic process (i.e. comprehension and production) (e.g. Cacciari & Tabossi, 1988; Swinney and Cutler, 1979; Tabossi et al., 2009; Tabossi & Zardon, 1993) it is strongly claimed native speakers of a language faster process idiomatic expressions compared to literal usage.

On the other hand, the main concern of this paper has not been a mere study of idioms but tracing the cognitive process of understanding them and the socio-cultural factors of meaning construction. It also investigates the above mentioned result of whether understanding such figurative phrases differ in first and second languages.

1- Theoretical Framework

This research is based mainly on Fauconnier's (1994) and Facuconnier andt Turners's (2002) cogni- sematic approach which encompasses four virtual mental spaces: verbal, representational, interactive and compositional.

3.1 Idioms

For two consecutive decades, linguists and researchers have been keeping an eye out for defining formulaic language in general, but so far no definite results have been shown up. Similarly, it is almost impossible to come up with a particular definition of an idiom.

The term *idiom* can be commonly found in literature, but what it refers to varies. It is important to highlight that “idioms and idiomaticity, while closely related, are not identical” (Fernando 1998, 30). The connection to other figurative as well as multi-word expressions resulted in dilemma. The fundamental dilemma that idioms present is the gap between its scope of literalness and figurativeness/metaphorcity. There are other features of idioms that have also been considered, such as their formal characteristics, for example, its formalist tradition: the text under discussion is considered mainly as a sequence of words. That is, the prime focus is on the pattern of language, rather than on the lexical implications, or on the biographical and historical relevance of the work itself.

3.2 Proverbs

Similar to idioms, many attempts have been conducted to trace a definition of proverbs, yet it, still, has been controversial to come up with a definite meaning.

Wisdom literature developed throughout the ancient Near East, with Egyptian examples dating back to before the middle of the 3rd millennium B.C. It revolved around the professional philosophers, or wise men, and clerks in the service of the court. The most common form of these wise sayings was oral instructions; typically, experience-related, easily memorized and common statements. (english-culture.com/)

2- Data

The data was mainly collected online through different websites:

<https://www.ef.com/wwen/english-resources/english-idioms/>,

<https://leverageedu.com/blog/idioms-with-examples/>

and

https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%85%D8%A9_%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%AB%D8%A7%D9%84_%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9

3- Method of Analysis

5.1 Procedures

The steps followed in the study are:

1. Introducing the theoretical part of the study which covers: cognitive pragmatics, idioms, proverbs, mental space theory and the theory of integration in English.
2. Applying two theories of cognitive pragmatics, namely Mental Theory and Conceptual Integration Theory, to the selected English and Arabic idioms proverbs.
3. The analysis is a quantitative study based on conducting a questionnaire targeting random different categories of people (around 40 participants) whether socially, educationally and characteristically. The questionnaire is divided into two groups: group A is general questions aiming at forming a general overview about idioms and proverbs. Moreover, the second group, group B, is more specific into

details. In this group, the participants are given two lists of idioms: Arabic and English with relatively different level of commonality and complicity attached with some questions that target the core of the mental space theory. Those questions were the same for both the English and the Arabic lists.

The questionnaire was a digital one conducted online via google-forms. Sometimes, translation was needed for some participants who are not familiar with English. However, to maintain the highest level of credibility, the translation was, only, for the questions not the English idioms. Yet, some hurdles showed up especially with participants who are unfamiliar with participating in online questionnaires. Also, some sense of punctuality was highly needed from the participants' side as some of them took more than two weeks to answer it. On the other hand, depending on online questionnaires saves much time and efforts due to the immediate delivery of results once the participants get done with the given questions.

4. Conducting a contrastive cogni-pragmatic analysis of the English and Arabic proverbs in terms of figurative conceptual metaphors conceptual integration networks.

5. Presenting the main conclusions of the study, recommendations, and suggestions for further studies

6- Analysis

6.1 Culture and Background

According to Fauconnier, people's cultural background is mainly effective in forming conceptual domains. In other word, the more familiar the locutions are, the more accurate the connotation gets to the hearer. Applicably, all of the questionnaire's respondents agree that both idioms and proverbs throw back people's culture and beliefs. Moreover, around 97% of them stated that idioms and proverbs can help in understanding our (or other) culture through the used locutions such phrases.

For example, the Egyptian proverb: مسيرك يا ملوخيه تيجي تحت المخرطه as shown in (figure1)

It would be quite challenging to a listener whom is given such a proverb as the locutions: Molokhia and its chopper are Egyptian-culture- related ones. However, the use of such an idiom is universal since it is used to refer to threatening or warning someone whether seriously or for fun. The figure below shows the link between the surface meaning that the hearer may get (input space 1) and the connotation of the locutions used in such a proverb (input space two) resulting in the generic space which maps onto each of the inputs. Then comes the blended space which refers to the actual usage of the sample.

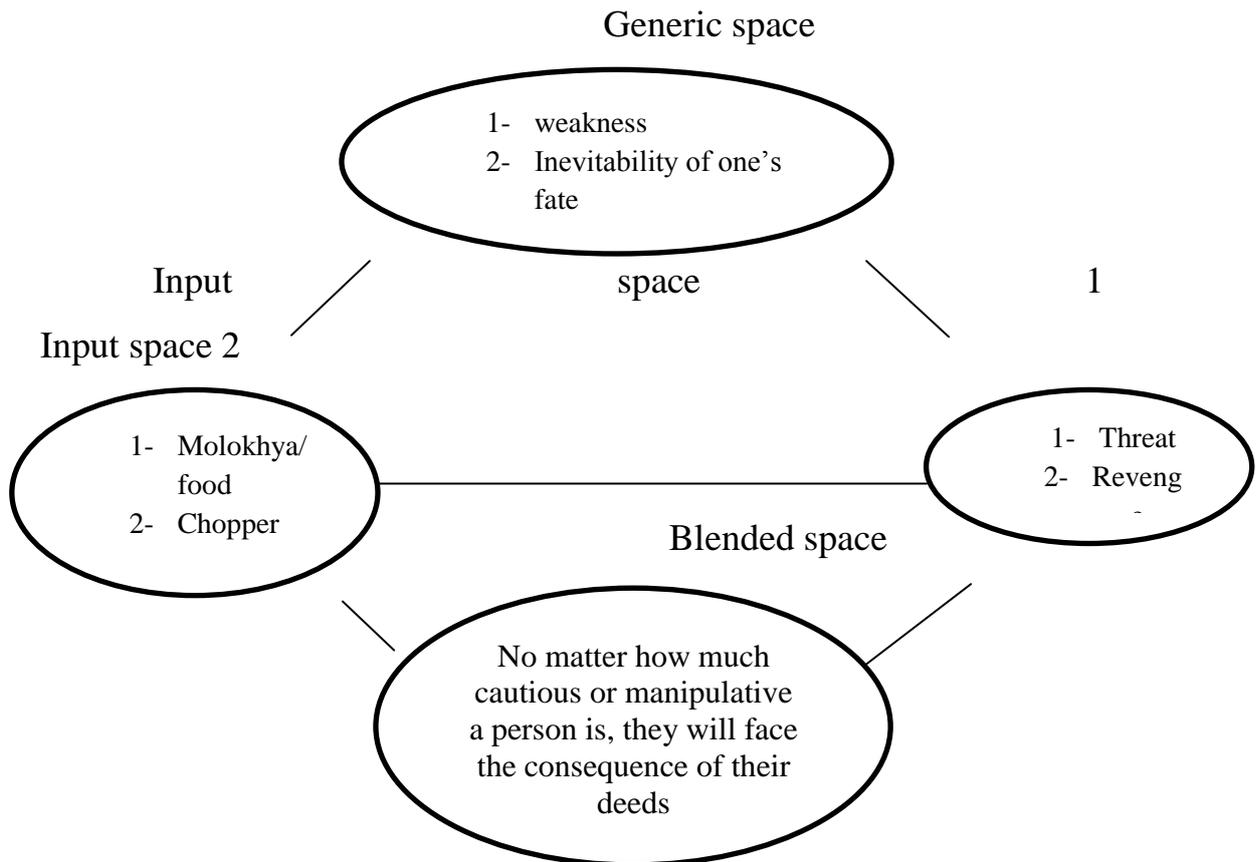


Figure 1

Equivalently, the American proverb *a dime a dozen* as shown in (figure 4) is not clear enough for a non- native hearer especially if they are not familiar with what a dime is: an American ten- cent coin. So by acknowledging that, the proverb will successfully make sense to the hearer that it is used for labelling something as cheap or valueless.

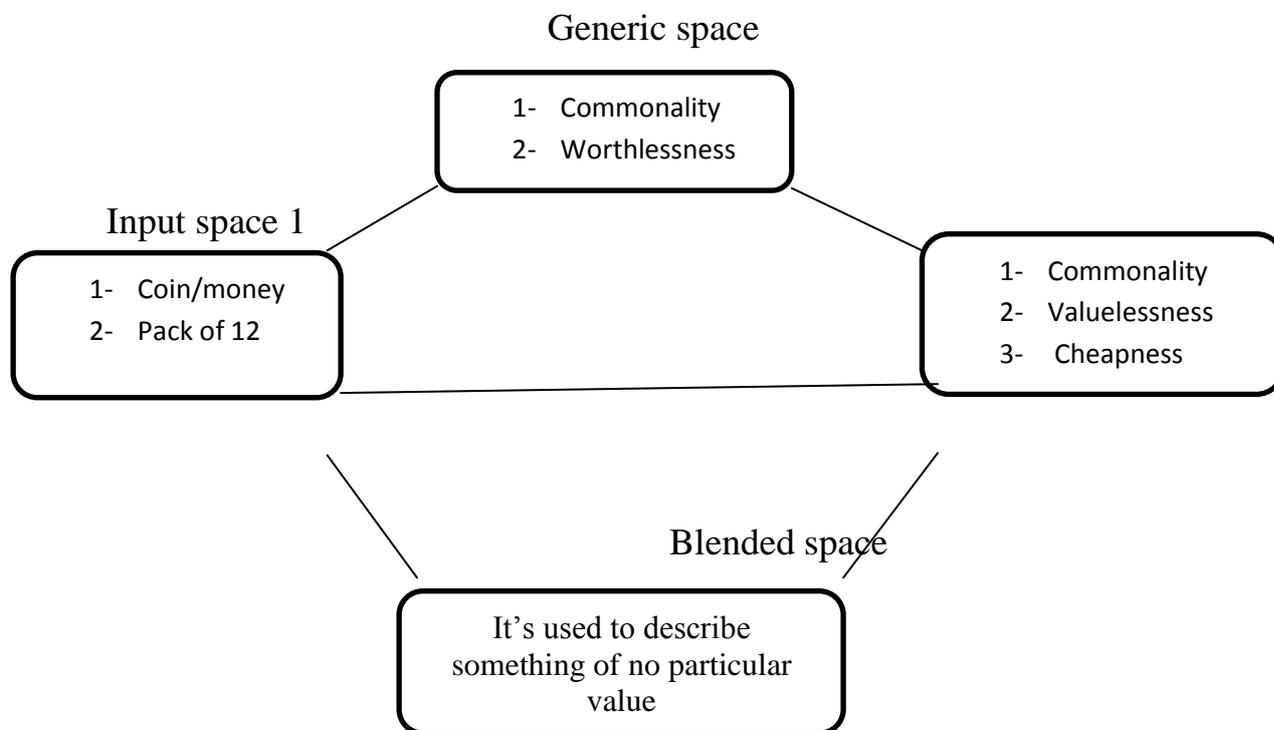


Figure 2

Subsequently, 87% of the correspondents stated that misunderstanding and confusion are expected if people do not share the same culture or, at least, have a sufficient background on which they rely when interpreting idioms and proverbs. However, only 66.6% admitted the importance of having a historical background of the culture-related locations.

6.2 Social background

As it is shown in (figure 5), 69.2% of the participants voted that their wide social experience was the main reason for interpreting the given phrases correctly, for example, the social category like caretakers and sellers is the best in using idioms due to socializing widely. However, a category of students and housewives are less in understanding idioms due to their limited social experience.

Likewise, 74.4 % said that their social level, in particular, has a role in the understanding process. For examples, people who work at some occupations like police officers and engineers have shown less response. Yet, only 45.2% showed that they use idioms and proverbs in their daily talks. This, in return, sheds the light on the fact that one can understand idioms and proverbs even if they do not use them regularly. In other words, one's social environment has a significant role in the interpretation process rather than the usage only.

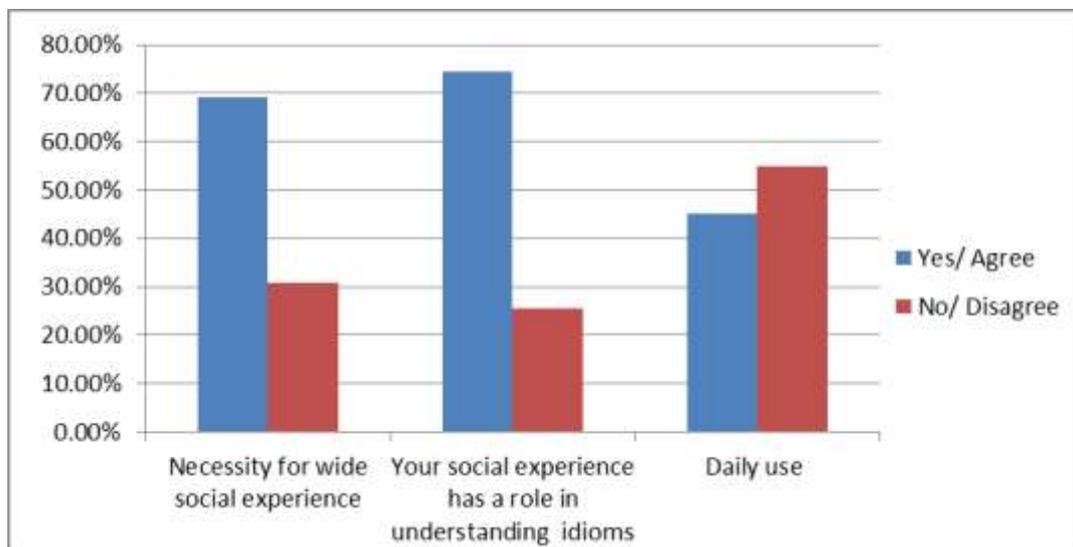


figure 3

a- Gender Bias

Moreover, the participants show relative results when asked if idioms and proverbs are stereotyping men and women. 46.2% agreed and 25.6% disagreed, but around 28.2% stated that they do not know.

The following examples show the mental process in comprehending some gender-biased idioms

Firstly, the proverb *ما يجيها الا رجلها* as shown in (figure 3) implies a sense of male chauvinism: challenges and difficulties are overcome, only, by men. It emphasises the fact that women are in the secondary position. They do not have the equal place with men and are always in the accessory position. This, by default, affects the mental image of interpreting the idiom in terms of the position of men in the eastern culture.

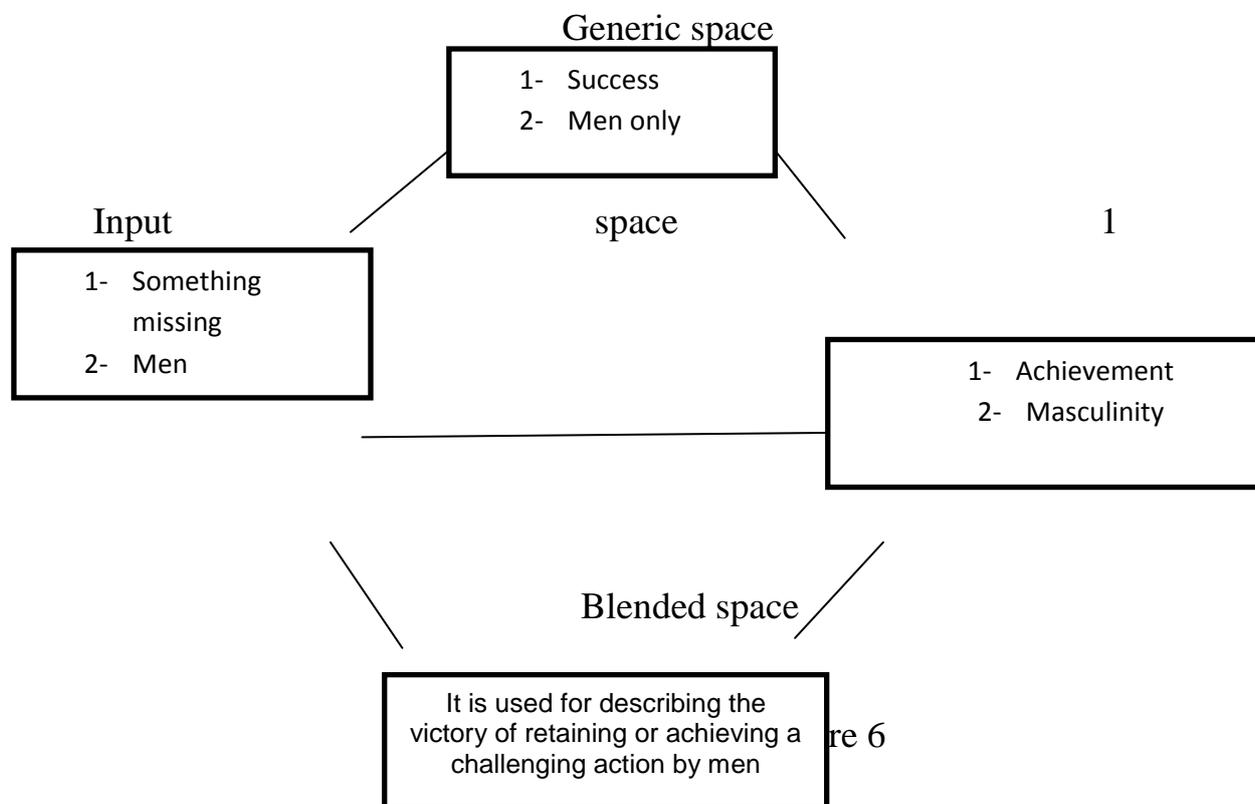


Figure 3

6.3 Educational Background

Faucionner defines ‘mental spaces’ as small conceptual packets constructed as we think and talk, for purposes of local understanding and action. Accordingly, such spaces are full of accumulative elements including cultural, social, personal and educational aspects through which the interaction process manifests itself.

Considering the element of educational/ academic level in constructing the mental understanding process of idioms and proverb,

the questionnaire's participants seem to have a different perception of the effectiveness of such a factor.

By investigating the necessity of having a high educational level in comprehending the figurative phrases 31/40 deny on the significance of this factor, in general. On the other hand, only 7/40 participants emphasize on the effectiveness of education.

However, applicably, when giving the participants a group of Arabic idioms and another of English one, results vary: 66.4% voted for being independently able to understand the given Arabic figurative phrases without any need for extra illustration and 85% denied that their educational/ academic level has any role in their understanding. On the other hand, when given the English list of idioms, around 75% stated that they cannot get the right meaning without some assistance and almost 61.5% suggested that their educational/academic level shares a role in comprehending those English phrases. This is statistically shown in figure 11.

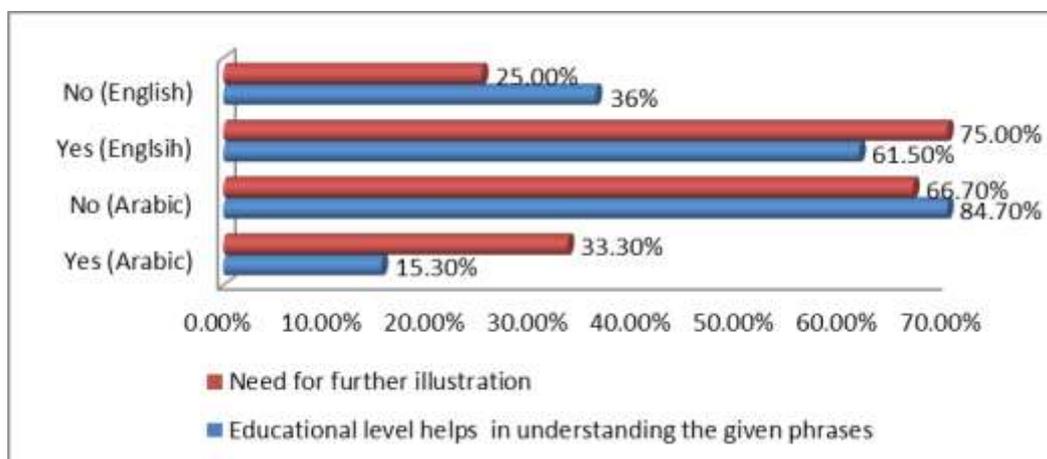
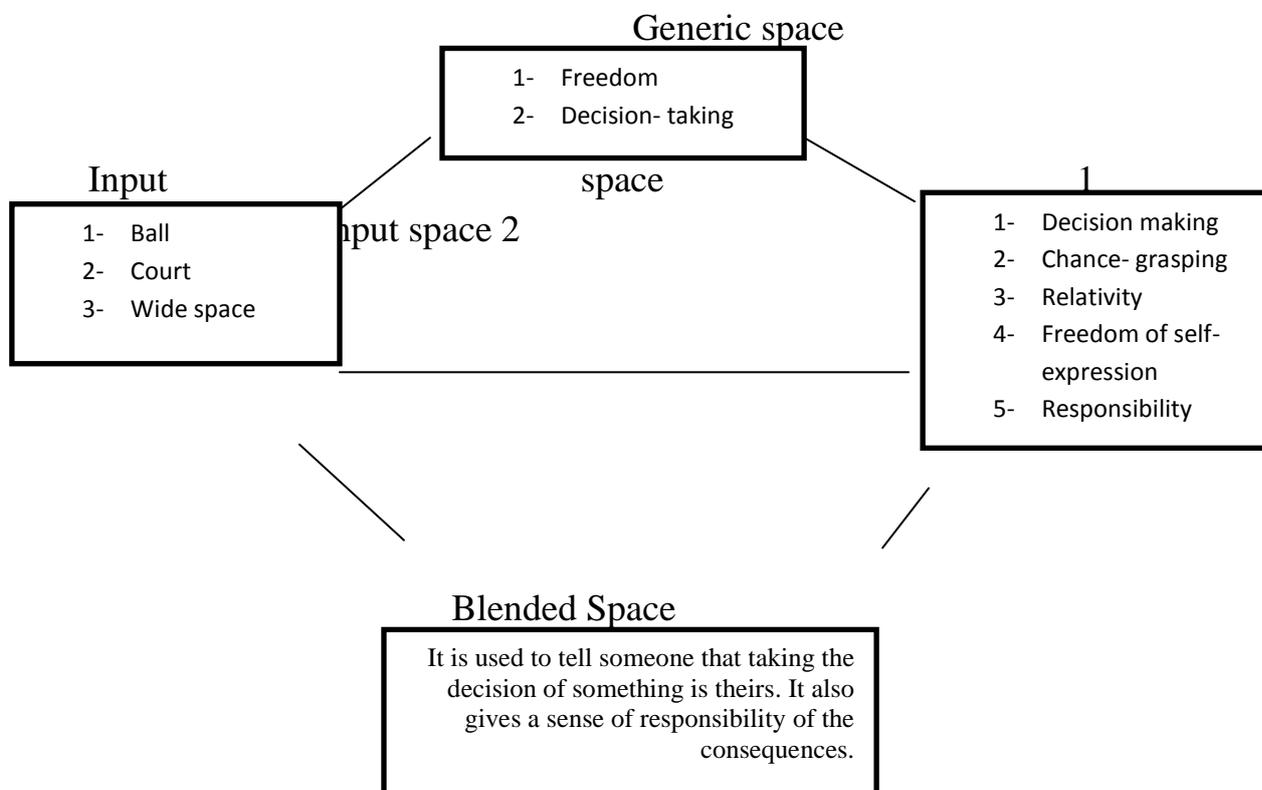


Figure 4

For example, the meaning of the English proverb *the ball is in your court* can be effortlessly obtained only if the listener is familiar with the meaning of its words *ball & court* and can guess the similarity of its equivalent in Arabic الكوره في ملعبك as shown in (figure 4)



6.3.1 Use of Fi

6.3.2 figurative Phrases

Whereas educational/academic level highly participates in understanding figurative phrases, especially the second language ones, the use of first language idioms and proverbs reaches its highest level by the uneducated speakers. In other word, the higher educated the speaker is, the fewer idioms & proverbs he uses and vice versa.

It can be obviously seen that educated people are less in using idioms and proverbs in comparison to those who are less or un-educated due to the belief that most of those figurative phrases' terms show less

cultivation and enlightenment. Subsequently, first language Idioms and proverbs are seen as an indication of literacy and less urbanity.

Moreover, uneducated people seem to stick to their own culture with its local idioms and proverbs from the perspective of maintaining their inherited identity. Thus, their culture is the only available source of knowledge reachable to them. On the other hand, high educated people are more open-minded and familiar with various cultures through their scientific or philosophical background. Hence, they perceive first language figurative phrases as old-fashioned and common. On contrary, using second language idioms and proverbs are confined by the educational elites, especially jobs that are related to second language major.

For example, the Arabic idiom *مش كل من رص الصواني حلواني* as shown in (figure ١٦) is common in the eastern societies giving the privilege for professionals and experts. Yet, it is quite rare to be heard among high educated people. Instead, they refrain from using it assuming that using such level of commonality idioms can negatively affects their academic and social image.

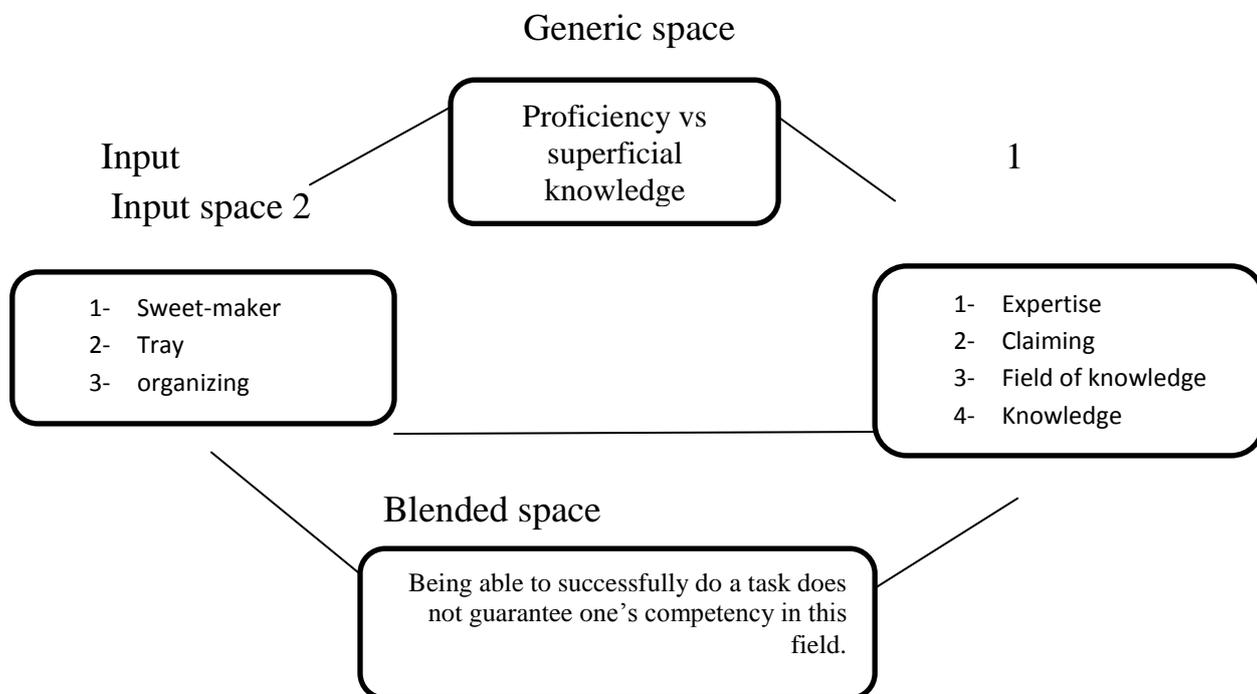


Figure 5

6.4 The significance of personal experience

Personal experience is the accumulative impact of being exposed to different life situations whether positively or negatively. This, by default, shapes the person's perception, knowledge and attitude towards his eternal self and the external surroundings. Furthermore, personal experience has been questioned of its role in the mental process of understanding idioms and proverbs.

Based on the questionnaire conducted on different segments of people, around 87% of the participants suggest that their personal

experience helps them in understanding the given Arabic idioms and around 77% vote for the same point of view for the given English idioms. Subsequently, it can be concluded that personal experience shares a vast significance in understanding figurative phrases.

a- Age

Basically, when dealing with personal experience as a factor of the mental understanding process of idioms and proverbs, the relevance of age should be investigated too. It is assumed that the elder a person gets the wiser/ knowledgeable he becomes. Correspondingly, idioms and proverbs are part of such knowledge that is expected to be obtained by age.

Furthermore, by questioning how far one's age affects his comprehension of the given figurative phrases, around 77% agree that age holds a significant role in understanding the Arabic idioms and proverbs and around 66 % for the English ones as shown in (figure 6).

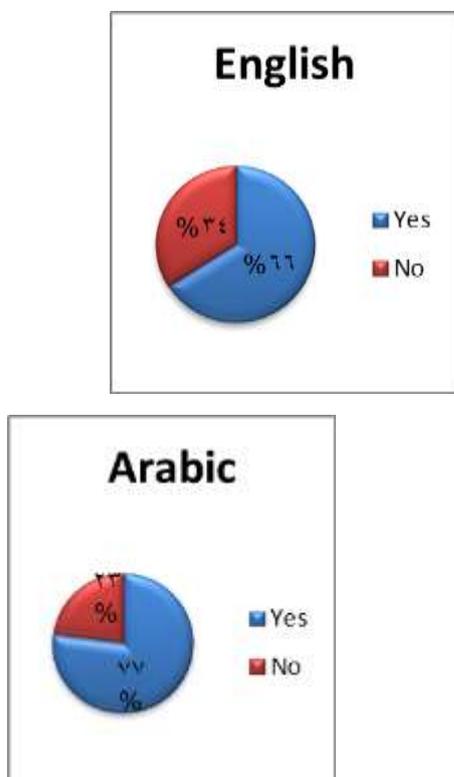


Figure 6

For instance, despite the fact that the Arabic idiom *ما فائده الدنيا الواسعه اذا كان حذاوك ضيقا* is a first language phrase, it is quite challenging for young people to get its connotation. Not only because it is in el fusha, but also because its connotative meaning is relatively different from its literal meaning. Hence it requires a reasonable age to be able to get its figurative meaning. This is clearly shown in figure 7.

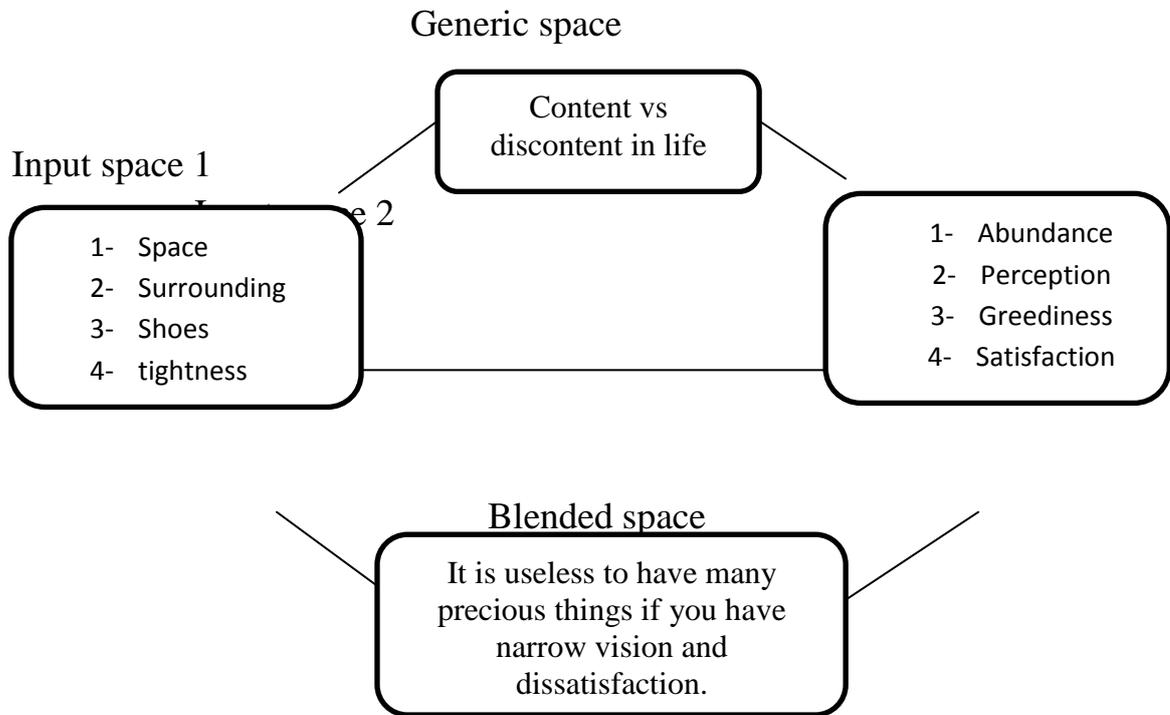


Figure 7

6.4.2 Life situations and linking

Personal experience does not refer only to one's knowledge and mental awareness, but also to one's exposure to different situations in life. In other word, personal experience is constructed by one's actions and reactions in different life situations. As a result, he sometimes set a link between the idiom or proverb that he gets hears and a life situation that he got exposed to in the past. Despite- in some factors- Arabic idioms give a different or opposite results to the English ones

in the questionnaire's findings, the result of this question is very close: around 64% of the applicants say that they call back some past relevant experience when they read the given Arabic idioms and 58% adopt the same voting for the English ones.

For instance, as shown in (figure 8,) the Arabic proverb العتاب هديه الاحباب can be acquired smoothly, especially if the listener associates it with a past situation when he was told it in a way of cooling down him/her of not accepting blaming.

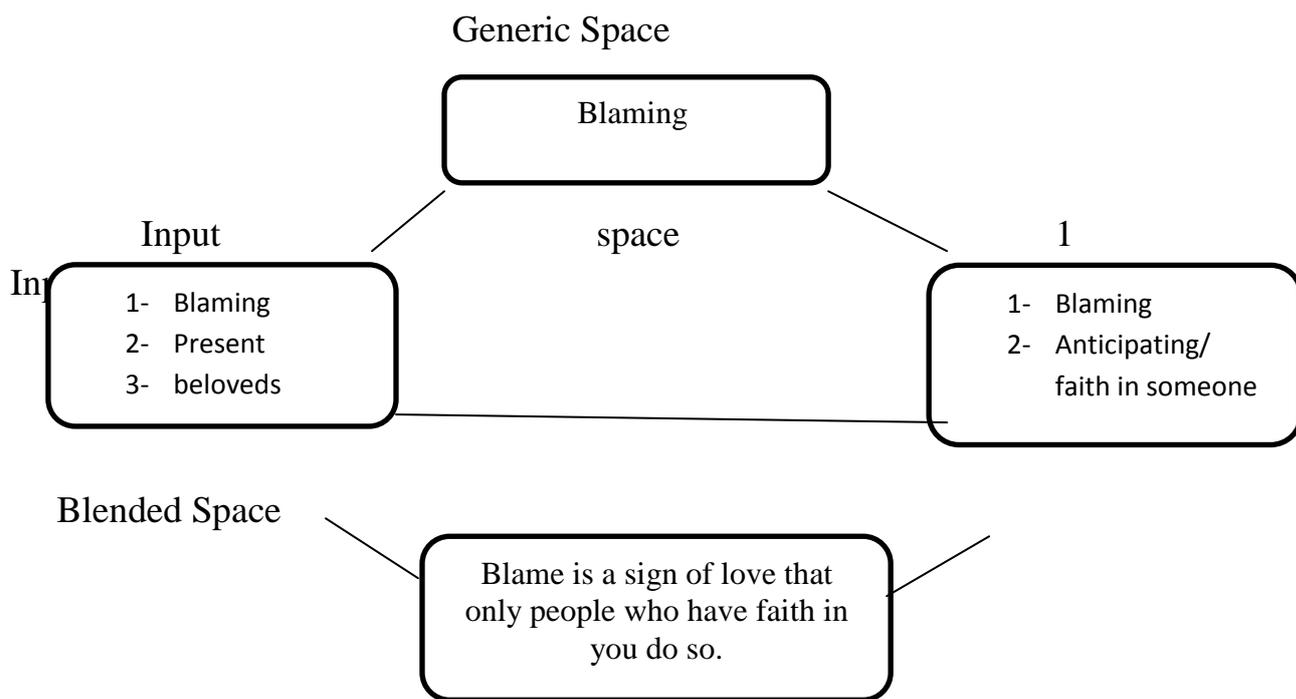


Figure 8

7- Conclusion

The aim of this study was to elucidate the cognitively complex yet seemingly effortless processing of verbal communication performed between people within/out same culture by examining patterns in cogni-linguistic structures. To that end, a corpus of –both- English and Arabic idioms and proverbs were examined on transfers between the four cognitive inter-connected spaces that listeners have to subconsciously represent while processing these figurative phrases (Fauconnier & Turner 2002): the two Input Spaces, representing the contents of a specific situation or idea , the Generic Space, representing a common structure which is present in all input spaces, and the Blended Space, representing a general structure from a generic space as well as some elements from input spaces chosen and mapped onto this space through selective projection .

The cognitive emphasis is justified by the fact that communication will not be examined here from the viewpoint of an external observer, as happens in linguistics and in the philosophy of language, where attention is focused on the finished product. Instead, the research takes a standpoint within the mind of the individual participants, trying to explain how each communication act is generated mentally and then comprehended mentally by the other interlocutors.

The research aims at describing the mental states of the participants in a communicative interaction particularly while uttering and comprehending figurative phrases in both first and second languages.

The results of this study show, first, that there is a mental systematic dynamical mapping in everyday thought and language for purposes of local understanding and action: idioms and proverbs were exemplified (Fauconnier 1997), second, that such mappings are confined with some cogni-socio-cultural factors resulting in constructing a relative unstable conceptual domains .

The Integral Factors in Comprehending Idioms and Proverbs

Since Fauconnier related understanding to what he called mental spaces- which according to his definitions- are ‘small conceptual packets’, people’s perception may vary based on what their figuratively mental packets contain. From this angle, linguistic expressions do not have stable meanings themselves; rather they work like ‘partial building instructions’ for the construction of complex but temporary conceptual domain.

Accordingly, such packets are formed from the accumulation of each one’s experience in life. In other word, individuals get exposed to different socio-cultural factors that affect their personalities, mentalities and interactions.

On that note, people's understanding of idioms and proverbs shows relative results based on their cultural background, socio-educational level and personal experience.

Moreover, such factors are of equal significance in establishing their needed knowledge in the meaning construction process. For example, the culture-related factor is important because some culture-related terms would form hurdles in comprehending the given figurative expression if the listener is not familiar with what they stand for like Mulokhya. Likewise, one's surrounded environment and social level play a crucial role in the use and familiarity with idioms and proverbs as some jobs and social categories record higher level of using idioms than other categories, like caretakers, builders and in rural areas. Similarly, one's personal experience is highly effective in shaping their understanding of such figurative phrases such as age: the more people get older, the wider their range of vocabulary gets which, by default, assists their understanding. Additionally, the ability of linking daily life situations in which they are exposed to different incidents is also indispensable in their interpretation of idioms and proverbs like concepts such as regret, blaming and punctuality.

Furthermore, the only additional significance goes for the educational level in its huge effectiveness when it comes to dealing with second language figurative expressions. Based on the conducted questionnaire, the participants of high or language education are more

likely to be familiar or – at least- able to guess the meaning of the given second language idiomatic phrases.

In conclusion, like any other linguistic expressions, understanding idioms and proverbs highly requires integrating all the socio-cultural factors which according the Fauconnier and Turner, are relative and differ from a person to another. Thus, the perception is necessarily different even if the mental process of understanding is systematic and dynamic: follows the same track of fauconnier's four spaces.

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